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ABSTRACT

The opportunity to discover the flaws in newspaper letters to the editor and to evaluate the ensuing consequences can help beginning persuasive writing students, who have had little practice at forming arguments, begin to conceptualize for themselves the ways that principles of persuasive discourse apply in particular writing situations. The study and application of these principles can provide a point of departure from which students can advance their reading and writing to more complex forms of argument. For example, two writing assignments based on class analysis of a letter concerning the hostage crisis in Iran first showed the students how the letter's language was working to reveal the writer and then how the students' language would characterize them as surely as the language of the first writer. An assignment in which the need to integrate emotions and values was essential to their argument sharpened the students' focus on the way language functions in persuasion. Overall, the students' close attention to language got them beneath the surface of each letter of the motives and judgments behind the words. (HTH)

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USING LETTERS TO THE EDITOR AS TEACHING EXAMPLES:

SOME OPENING STRATEGIES FOR INSTRUCTORS

OF PERSUASIVE DISCOURSE

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
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Newspaper letters to the editor can make effective teaching examples for beginning writers of persuasive discourse. They usually possess those rhetorical factors which can alert students to the close connection that exists between writer, subject, and audience, namely, a vivid persona with a clearly identifiable voice, a strong sense of audience, and a sharply defined topic and purpose. At the same time, because these letters address the students at their level and frequently discourage trust in the values and beliefs they promote, they can be used to develop a class's confidence in their capacity to read and judge critically. My experience suggests that the letters work best at the start of a course in persuasive writing, since they contain many of the shortcomings one finds in the work of students who have had little or no practice at making arguments. The writers of these letters are commonly disposed, without sufficient reflection, to take "official" or "fashionable" positions; the judgments they draw from their evidence is frequently shallow

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or makeshift; they resort to cliches or euphemisms where definition of terms is needed; the persona they adopt in one paragraph is liable to change identities in the next. The opportunity to discover these flaws and evaluate the consequences that follow from them can help students begin to conceptualize for themselves the ways in which the principles of persuasive discourse apply in particular writing situations. Ultimately, their study and application of these principles can provide a point of departure from which they can advance in their reading and writing to more complex forms of argument.

In what follows, I will discuss a few of the teaching strategies I have found to be successful in connection with these letters. In doing so, I will refer to one letter I have used as a model of flawed writing, as well as several of the reading and writing assignments I built around it. The letter reads as follows:

Iran Has Pushed The U.S. Too Far

- (1) We watched them take our people.
- (2) We watched them burn our flags.
- (3) We watched them bury our dead.
- (4) But we will not let them bring about the
- (5) downfall of the American pride and honor
- (6) through which we put faith in our democracy.
- (7) The people of the United States have tried
- (8) every possible action to get back our
- (9) American people.
- (10) Even the Entebbe-like rescue mission failed.
- (11) Doesn't Iran realize that it is bringing
- (12) about its own destruction?
- (13) I have no idea what the next step will be
- (14) but in the end it may take the complete

(15) annihilation of Iran.

(16) The American people cannot stand by and be
(17) punished. We have suffered long enough.

(18) The United States in a fever pitch could be,
(19) the deadliest weapon ever known to mankind.¹

To evoke responses from the students, I like, at first, to have several of them read aloud in class whatever letter is assigned, so that they can get a "feel" for what the writer is saying by "listening" to the way in which he or she says it. I have found that this assignment is most effective when the students are allowed to rehearse their readings and alerted to pay close attention to the "flavor" of the writer's language. After each student reads, I ask her to explain why she adopted a particular tone or inflection. The readings and the questions that follow can produce valuable insights. Students often recognize that their renderings of a piece indicate their reactions to the writer's ideas and intentions. In the case of the Iran letter quoted above, certain students gave a reading that was almost solemn while others parodied it. By asking the class to account for these differences in tone, I was able to elicit a debate over whether Stanley's anger was "patriotic" or "blind." The debate led some students to take the first steps beyond imitation to analysis and criticism, in so much as they attempted to establish a connection between their renditions of Stanley and their judgments of him.

In order to pick up on the issues raised by the reading

and analysis of Stanley's letter, I followed with two closely related writing assignments. I devised them, on the one hand, to allow students to examine more closely how language was working in the letter to reveal the language user. On the other, I wanted them to gain valuable distance and independence from Stanley in order that they might see how their language would characterize them just as surely as did his. I first asked the class to write a short letter of their own similar in length to Stanley's on a controversial or potentially explosive issue--they could choose whatever issue they liked--in which they were to assume they were writing in Stanley's person and deliver their views as they thought he would. The assignment would give them the chance to grasp what it was like to enter the writer's skin in the way that an actor knows what it means to be a character he portrays. At the same time, since they would have to make conscious language choices in their imitations, their writing would afford the kind of distance needed for them to recognize how those choices indicate the way a writer sees his subject, establishes relations with his audience, and devises solutions to the problems he addresses. I next asked them to analyze and evaluate Stanley's letter in any way they thought would best indicate their reactions to it.

In their imitations of Stanley, most students elected (consciously or otherwise) to represent their positions in broad strokes. They rejected both subtlety of thought and bypassed any effort at complex or difficult solutions to the

topics they chose to write about. One student began his letter in the following way: "Abortion is murder. The woman who has one should go to the chair." Another said, "Religious cults are kidnapping our children. We must fight back with all the weapons we have...and completely destroy them." Many were able to capture with some success Stanley's tone, as well as his patterns of thought and expression. Their efforts offered me the opportunity to introduce topics that would prepare them for their next assignment, the written analysis of the letter on Iran. I brought the papers to class, read parts of several aloud, and asked the students to critically evaluate them. To open the discussion, I suggested that they consider the following questions: Why did the writer who had recommended the death penalty for women who undergo abortions leave out any reference to the physician responsible for the operation? Did he see that as the kind of thing Stanley would do? If so, why? Why did the student who had written about religious cults select words like kidnapping, weapons, and destroy in his piece? Would he have used those words if he were writing in his own behalf? The answers to these questions suggested that while the students were able to characterize their language choices as ways of imitating what they considered to be Stanley's emotional or violent response to things, they were not able to perceive that their imitations might reveal deeper layers of thought that would include an implied criticism of the values and standards of judgment they found to be latent in Stanley's use of language.

The same failure to conceptualize clearly their evaluations of Stanley was present in their critical essays. Several found the sentiments expressed in the letter to be patriotic; others thought the writer "silly" or "ridiculous"; still others said he was suffering from a "psychological problem." One student contended that since we did not, in fact, see Iran bury our dead (as indicated in line 3), Stanley was guilty of "exaggeration" and could not be trusted. The comments were generally unsympathetic. And though I could identify with that, I found in the essays that whether the writers tended to pick at Stanley or side with him, they resorted to labels in place of real analysis and criticism. They made no concentrated effort to evaluate his use of language or explain what relation that language bore to his way of seeing the hostage problem and proposing a solution to it. There was no reference to phrases like "the deadliest weapon ever known to mankind," (line 18) or "complete annihilation of Iran," (lines 13, 14) or how these phrases defined Stanley's concept of power and the proper use of it. No one bothered about the words pride and honor (line 5) or examined the suitability of the comparison made between the Iranian rescue mission and that at Entebbe. (line 10) Among the sympathizers, there was no one who established a reasonable basis for accepting Stanley's "patriotism" and call for action.

What came out of our discussion of these critical pieces was that the class was willing to shift their positions when pressed to define their terms. Silly could be interchangeable with crazy, and ridiculous could just as well mean unreasonable,

careless, or untrustworthy. By the end of class, the students had convinced each other that Stanley was a fumbling idiot who became "too emotional," (the sympathizers were giving ground) which caused him to lose his head, which caused him to make a fool of himself. They talked as though emotions were divorced in their minds from values and ideals. Not any of them held that a writer could take mature responsibility for what he felt strongly about or talk of such things in a reasonable way. Nor did they connect their disapproval of Stanley with his failure to do just that.

The chance for them to discover this for themselves was there, I thought, if I could construct an assignment that would allow them to write a persuasive piece of their own in which the need to integrate emotions and values would be essential to their argument. I asked them to read Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's "Wake Up, America"² and Martin Luther King's "Letter From Birmingham Jail" and to take special note of the relation that existed in those works between the emotions expressed by the writers and the ideals and values they promoted. They were then to write an essay of their own on the following topic:

Take a position in which you attack or defend the following statement by applying it to some aspect or condition of your own life: There are times when strong feelings help us to clarify our understanding of experience, as well as the values we draw from it, and to communicate that understanding and those values to others. On such occasions it would be difficult, if not impossible, to think or act responsibly without being in touch with our feelings.

One of the most instructive responses was written by a young Jewish woman who discussed the conflict she felt between her desire to be independent of her parents and her respect for the traditions they upheld. Here are a few of her observations:

Most of my friends that I go out with have different ideas about religion and sex than their parents...The things they say and do confuse me about myself...Where it will all end, I don't know...My parents know I feel this way and don't say anything about it.

When I am home I want to be part of my family.
When I am out I want to be like my friends.
But this is hard and getting harder to do.

What seemed to bother the writer most was a sense of failure. Most of her friends, she said, were able to break with the "lifestyles" of their parents, particularly in matters of religion and sex, while she could not. When she compared herself with them, she felt immature and lacking in "nerve." She could not, however, resolve for herself what would be "the right thing to do." Though she wanted to be independent, she had decided, at least for a time, to follow the influence of her family and their traditions.

Her sense of failure, her feeling that she lacked nerve and was immature, prevented her from taking a firm position or making an argument from it. She was unable to decide, even for herself, what should or should not be done. Yet, there was in her essay an honest effort to formulate a clear concept of herself based on what she admired--independence and traditional values--and to locate that self in relation to a set of standards--"the right

thing to do"--that would give her the means with which to work herself clear of her confusion. There was also in her treatment of her topic a groping after some common ground where she could establish a dialogue between herself and friends, herself and parents. In short, there was in what she had written the germ of good persuasive writing. I spoke to her about my responses to her piece and suggested that she write another in which she sought to find a way of responsibly defending or attacking someone (she could use herself as a subject, if she wished) who had acted or refrained from acting without being absolutely sure about the rightness or wrongness of what she was doing.

In the classes that followed, I attempted to sharpen the focus on language and the way it functioned in persuasion. My next assignment read as follows:

At one point in "Wake Up, America" A. Solzhenitsyn says, "Communism is as crude an attempt to explain society and the individual as if a surgeon were to perform his delicate operations with a meat-ax." At another, he characterizes his imprisonment in the U.S.S.R. in the following way: "I have been in the red burning belly of the dragon." In his letter on Iran, Stanley says, "The United States in a fever pitch could be the deadliest weapon ever known to mankind." Write a paper in which you argue your preference for one author's appeals to his audience over the other's based on your responses to these analogies.

Of the responses to the question, there were several that I found particularly encouraging. Overall, the students' close attention to language got them beneath the surface of each

piece to the motives and judgments behind the words. One student who found Stanley lacking in courage was able to make his case by saying that while Stanley would like to see Iran bombed, he "sort of avoids the issue" by writing "I don't know what the next step will be." There was reflected in his comments an awareness that the relation which exists between Stanley's anger and his values (or conscience) is an uneasy one, and because of that his judgments rest on shaky ground. Another essay contained the following observations:

Solzenitson's picture of the surgon with the meat axe shows us how people make it hard for themselves to do what is right, which is already hard. Its easy for a surgon to make a mistake even when he uses the right instrements. Hes like us in the essay. To do right takes a lot of training and study. But the meat ax is what people reach for to get the job done. Stanley does this when he says to destroy Iran. He uses words like a meat ax, and wants us to do the same.

The set of essays requiring that the class compare Stanley with Solzhenitsyn were the last to include the letter on Iran. These assignments and the discussions generated from them took up roughly the first three weeks of the term. From there, we moved on to more complex forms of argument and other issues connected with persuasive discourse, including logic, analysis and presentation of evidence, and the organization of ideas around a strong central thesis. With Stanley's letter behind us, we were able to approach these matters as being something more than the attainment of mechanical skills. A context had been created whereby we could talk of a writer's appeal to her

audience as disclosing something important about herself.
Good persuasive writing came to mean for us essentially that
the relation between writer, subject, and audience was conducted with respect and incorporated honest , responsible thinking.

Footnotes

1. An open letter to the editor by Douglas Stanley, which appeared in The Pittsburgh Press, sec. B, p. 2, 27 June 1980.
2. From a speech delivered by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in New York on 9 July 1975. It is reprinted in Warning To The West (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 1975), pp. 52-90. The title is from Patterns of Exposition 6, ed. Randall E. Decker (Little, Brown and Company: Boston and Toronto, 1978) which includes a condensed version of the speech.